

From Vignette to Canvas: The Coronation of Josephine by Napoleon  
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The Coronation of Josephine by Napoleon is a three-dimensional vignette given to the Museum of American Architecture and Decorative Arts, and it portrays tiny wooden figures positioned in lifelike postures believed to have been used by Jacques-Louis David in the creation of his painting. The size of the vignette is about 40" wide and 24" tall, and it is believed that the figurines were created back in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. During the coronation ceremony Napoleon crowned himself and his wife Josephine, when at the time it was politically appropriate for the Pope to perform the coronation. The coronation of Josephine was significant because she became the first empress of France, and this essay will talk about the sensitive nature of the coronation, the significance of Josephine's coronation, and whether the painting followed the vignette.

How did Napoleon become such a significant figure? At a young age Napoleon demonstrated his interest and mastery of the art of using artillery in warfare, and after a year of attending military school Napoleon received the title of Second Lieutenant of artillery. His skills in artillery allowed him to excel in fighting with the Republic during the French Revolution and in other various wars, eventually earning him the rank of General. Following the French Revolution, Napoleon gained command of the French army in Italy, which allowed him to lead his men into various victories including the defeat of the Austrians and the Treaty of Campo Formio. Napoleon's popularity allowed him to become the First Consul, and in 1801 Napoleon was able to end the quarrel between France and the Roman Catholic Church. Three years later Napoleon crowned himself Emperor and made Josephine Empress of France in an extravagant coronation ceremony. Several important people attended the ceremony including Pope Pius VII,

whom Napoleon invited to add a religious milieu to the ceremony, but unexpectedly Napoleon surprised everyone by not allowing the Pope to crown him. Napoleon crowned himself to demonstrate his dictatorship, and to show that he would never be submissive to Rome nor the Pope. Ironically, Napoleon's fall started soon after he assumed position as emperor since he was considered a tyrannous emperor in the eyes of those who preferred equality.

Josephine de Beauharnais, also known as Empress Josephine of France, was a very controversial woman with life composed of complexities and immoralities. In order to maintain an affluent life style she engaged in relations with several men and in questionable businesses. Napoleon met Josephine during the outbreak of the French Revolution. He became tremendously infatuated with her to the point that he wanted to marry her even against the will of his own family. Soon after Napoleon and Josephine married, Josephine continued her adulterous lifestyle with other consorts. With a marriage in shambles and a threat of divorce and isolation, the future Empress of France had no other choice but to show submissiveness to Napoleon at the time of the coronation. As Empress, Josephine performed her state functions impeccably and with great care, even after Napoleon divorced her. The coronation of Josephine signified total submissiveness to her husband Napoleon much like the submission Napoleon sought from the French people. In addition, it signified the beginning of a supportive Josephine loyally standing at the side of Napoleon and a life of duties as a lady of high rank.

The coronation of Napoleon is a painting completed in 1807 by Jacques-Louis David, during Napoleon's coronation at Notre-Dame de Paris. The official name of the painting is the "Consecration of Emperor Napoleon I and Empress Josephine in the Cathedral of Notre-Dame de Paris on 2 December 1804". It took Davis' three years to complete the painting itself and it involved the contribution of various participants that had attended the coronation ceremony who

came and posed individually for the painting. Davis' paintings portrayed his enthusiasm towards the French Revolution and portrayed Napoleon as an opponent of absolutism.

Does the painting follow the vignette? The vignette itself looks very different from the actual painting in many aspects. First, the vignette portrays a small illustration or sketch of the actual painting. The vignette's wooden figurines represent a smaller number of attendants compared to the painting; portraying key participants such as Emperor Napoleon and Empress Josephine. Secondly, the vignette and painting are different in size comparison. The oil on canvas painting is enormous, measuring approximately 32 feet wide and 19 feet tall. Its distinguishable magnitude gives lots of room for creativity and complexity. The painting accentuates every aspect of the ceremony including the participants' faces, the clothing, the carpet, and the beautiful cathedral. On the other hand, the vignette is diminutive compared to the painting and is not as detailed in all aspects. The differences between the vignette and painting led to the conclusion that the vignette does not do the painting justice. The painting is by far more intricate and better represents the magnificence and splendor that was viewed by many of the spectators that attended the actual coronation of Emperor Napoleon and Empress Josephine.

In conclusion, my impression of the vignette as an artifact in the museum is immense; it is quite impressionable for the museum to carry a piece believed to be used by Louis-Jacques David back in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The simple belief that the vignette was used by the actual painter depicts that the artifact itself has a lot of value both monetary and relatively; monetary because of the artifact's magnificent condition despite the test of time and relatively because it showcases a historical part of the history of Napoleon before the fall of his empire. Despite the fact that Napoleon was considered a tyrannous emperor, he always personified the pursuit of the truth and

liberty. Napoleon's pursuit of the truth and liberty is what led him to his greatest achievements in his life starting with the French Revolution. Napoleon is a true demonstrator that anything can be achieved in life as long as there is a purpose.

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